

Message Text

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FOR SECRETARY FROM ATHERTON

U.S. DEL NO. 36

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: OVIP (ATHERTON, ALFRED L., JR.)

SUBJECT: PRIVATE CONVERSATION WITH PRIME MINISTER BEGIN-AUGUST 2

1. JUST PRIOR TO GENERAL MEETING WITH PRIME MINISTER BEGIN AND HIS COLLEAGUES, I MET WITH BEGIN, DAYAN AND LEWIS TO REPORT MORE PRIVATELY

ON THE MOST SENSITIVE PORTIONS OF MY TALK WITH SADAT.

2. I STRESSED TO BEGIN THE DEGREE OF EMOTION I FOUND IN SADAT AND SAID THAT THE WORD "INFURIATED" WAS PERHAPS APPROPRIATE TO CHARACTERIZE HIS MOOD. DESCRIBED HIS REACTION TO BEGIN'S WHOLE HANDLING OF THE "EL-ARISH GEUSTURE" IDEA IN UNVARNISHED TERMS--PARTICULARLY THE WAY SADAT VIEWS BEGIN'S STATEMENT THAT "NOBODY GETS SOMETHING FOR NOTHING."

RECOUNTING THE ARAB PRESSURES HE HAS RECENTLY BEEN UNDER, I SAID SADAT NOW FEELS HUMILIATED IN ARAB EYES AT HAVING HIS PRIVATE SUGGESTION TO WEIZMAN PUBLICIZED AND THEN REJECTED IN WHAT HE REGARDS AS VERY INSULTING FASHION. SAID I DID NOT BELIEVE HIS GREAT EMOTION WAS PLAYACTING. ON OTHER HAND, I SAID I WAS NOT DENYING INFLUENCE

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OF OTHER FACTORS ON HIS DECISION TO REFUSE TO PARTICIPATE IN TRI-LATERAL MEETING. SAID I DID NOT THINK BEGIN LETTER WAS THE SOLE CAUSE, THOUGH SADAT RETURNED TO IT FREQUENTLY.

3. I THEN GAVE BEGIN AND DAYAN MY PRELIMINARY JUDGMENT THAT WHAT WE'VE JUST SEEN IN ALEXANDRIA IS NOT MERELY A TACTICAL MANEUVER; SOMETHING MORE FUNDAMENTAL SEEMED TO ME TO BE GOING

ON IN SADAT'S MIND, AND I SAID I THOUGHT WE WERE NOW AT A MORE CRITICAL POINT IN THE NEGOTIATING PROCESS THAN I HAD PREVIOUSLY BELIEVED. NOT THAT THE OPPORTUNITY FOR PEACE IS LOST, BUT THAT THE DANGER OF LOSING IT IS RAPIDLY INCREASING. I STRESSED WHAT A TRAGEDY IT WOULD BE IF HISTORY JUDGED THIS OPPORTUNITY HAD BEEN LOST, AND SAID I KNEW HE SHARED THAT VIEW. SAID THAT THE SECRETARY WOULD WANT TO GO INTO THESE MATTERS MORE DEEPLY ON SUNDAY.

4. REMAINDER OF THE DISCUSSION WAS TAKEN UP BY MY CONFIRMING THAT TRILATERAL MEETING WAS INDEED OFF AND SADAT GAVE NO INDICATION HE COULD BE PERSUADED TO ENGAGE IN FURTHER DIRECT NEGOTIATIONS UNLESS ISRAEL EXCLUDED SUBJECT OF TERRITORY AND SOVEREIGNTY IN ADVANCE. NOR DID I DETECT ANY SECOND THOUGHTS IN THIS REGARD IN MY SUBSEQUENT MEETING WITH KAMEL. YET, I SAID, SADAT KEPT EMPHASIZING THAT HE WAS NOT CUTTING OFF DIRECT CONTACTS, NOR WITHDRAWING HIS OFFER OR NORMAL, PEACEFUL RELATIONS. THERE WAS, IN HIS VIEW, NO POINT IN FURTHER DIRECT TALKS WITHOUT PRIOR AGREEMENT ON FUNDAMENTAL TERRITORIAL PRINCIPLES.

5. DAYAN ASKED ABOUT SAUDI INFLUENCE ON SADAT'S DECISION, POINTING OUT THAT HTYE HAD APPARENTLY BEEN NEGATIVE DURING MY VISIT TO TAIF, AND THEY WERE NOT INFLUENCED BY BEGIN'S LETTER TO SADAT. I SCKNEWLEDGED THAT PRINCE SAUD HAD BEEN VERY SKEPTICAL, THAT I HAD TRIED TO ARGUE THERE FOR A MORE POSITIVE VIEW BUT HAD OBVIOUSLY NOT SUCCEEDED.

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SAID I HAD TO ASSUME THAT SAUDI SKEPTICISM HAD ALSO BEEN CONVEYED TO AND HAD INFLUENCED SADAT.

6. ONE SIGNIFICANT FOOTNOTE. AS I WAS DESCRIBING SADAT'S EMOTIONAL REACTION TO BEGIN'S LETTER CONCERNING EL-ARISH, WEIZMAN CAME IN, OBVIOUSLY ASSUMING HE SHOULD JOIN THIS "PRE-MEETING." IN A VERY AWKWARD MOMENT, BEGIN SUGGESTED IN HEBREW THAT HE LEAVE AND WAIT FOR THE GENERAL MEETING TO FOLLOW. HE DID, IN SOME ANNOYANCE AND EMBARRASSMENT. LEWIS NOTES THAT NOTHING COULD HAVE MORE GRAPHICALLY DEMONSTRATED THE PECULIAR RELATIONSHIP AMONG BEGIN, DAYAN AND WEIZMAN. BUT CLEARLY BEGIN DID NOT WANT WEIZMAN TO HEAR HOW HIS MISHANDLING OF SADAT'S SUGGESTION TO WEIZMAN HAD HLEPED TRIGGER SADAT'S RECENT ACTIONS.

7. BEGIN SAID LITTLE DURING THIS MEETING. HIS EMOTIONAL COUNTERATTACK CAME IN THE GENERAL MEETING, WHICH IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWED AND IS BEING REPORTED SEPARATELY.

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